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Juno bash has its dazzling and 'duh' moments

Canadian music scene has come a long way in the past 40 years

Members of Arcade Fire pose with their awards during the 40th Juno awards in Toronto Sunday. The band won Junos for album of the year, group of the year, alternative album of the year and songwriter of the year.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

The Junos began in 1971 when Canada's music industry – prodded by CRTC rulings (then headed by Pierre Juneau) that demanded increased radio airplay of Canadian product – devoted a night to celebrate its own stars. This was, after all, the international heyday of the Band, Neil Young, Steppenwolf, the Guess Who, Gordon Lightfoot and Anne Murray. A little chauvinism was needed, even if it was kind of small-townish.

Fast forward 40 years, Sunday night at a packed Air Canada Centre in Toronto, and a slick, well-produced extravaganza, with the accent on musical performances, proving Canadian music has come a long way. The Canadian industry has become a recognized powerhouse.

The night began with an amusing skit featuring rapper Drake, the show's host, in his dressing room chatting via his laptop with CTV news anchor Lloyd Robertson and teen sensation Justin Bieber (in Rotterdam). It was nice to hear Lloyd's stentorian voice break out into hip hop lingo. Drake sent his pal Justin a gift to remind him of home: a box of Tim Hortons doughnuts. Bieber proved himself a real ham actor. Later on, when he won for pop album (My World 2.0), he ended his taped message with "Go Leafs go!" (Hate to admit it, but they've played well over the second half of the season.)

Drake, one of the dullest rappers I've heard, looked great in a tux and generally acquitted himself well. The Toronto homeboy immediately called it "the greatest city in the whole world," igniting a packed Air Canada Centre. "I'm truly glad you've made hip hop front and centre." (However, although he led the pack with six nominations, he went home empty-handed.)

Wannabe hip hop popsters Down with Webster, nominated in the group category, performed the first musical number, Ain't You Want Me Girl – derivative as all hell: "I will be here forever." Let's hope not.

The first award was for best group: Arcade Fire, dressed to the nines mostly in shades of black, more sartorially resplendent than they were at the Grammys. (A note here on media coverage of their Grammy win, when they were described as "surprise winners" and "a relatively unknown group." Huh? Wasn't that Win Butler sharing the cover of Spin with Springsteen? Didn't they merit a Billboard year-end article declaring them leaders of the indie commercial breakthrough?) The Montreal alt-rockers returned soon thereafter to accept the songwriter award and deliver the requisite shout-out to Haiti.

Sarah McLachlan performed Lovin' You Is Easy, a dreadfully plaintiff ditty ("about it from the rooftops"), her precious hand movements caressing air. Then again, I've never appreciated her more-sensitive-than-thou schtick.

The fan-choice award went to – duh – Bieber. He thanked all his "Beliebers," and acknowledged he couldn't have done it without them. Duh, again.

Some of these acts I was seeing for the first time (hey, this geezer can't keep up with everything), so the show was a bit of an educational experience. One was Hedley: lead singer Jacob Hoggard had an irritating habit of making yelping sounds when he breathed in. "When you go nowhere to run, and nothing inside ... I'm not perfect but I keep trying, 'cause that's what I said I'd do ... Is it something I said or is it just my personality?" No, on both counts.

The lovely crossover-country star Shania Twain was inducted into the Hall of Fame, billed as "the most successful female artist of all time." (I wondered how Céline or Barbra would feel about that.) Of her trail-blazing country fashion, she said, "It was open midriff. I didn't even know I was the first to do it." I guess she meant first country star. Maybe it is what it is.

There was a testimonial from the equally lovely Taylor Swift: "You were the reason why I wanted to do this." Shania, making a comeback after a two-year hiatus and a divorce, was teary-eyed. The warbler from Timmins said she was more proud of Canada than she was of her induction. "I am really so proud of Canada's talent ... world-class talent ... I feel like I should be wearing the Canadian flag."

Lead-ins after commercial breaks were clever montages of funny moments from the past four decades of broadcasts, including Leonard Cohen's famous quip: "Only in Canada could I win a singer of the year award."

Former Band leader Robbie Robertson, who has a much-anticipated, long-overdue album out today, narrated "a love letter to Toronto," listing off a variety of clubs and locales, dutifully reading such excruciating lines as, "When we were young on Yonge Street."

Tokyo Police Club delivered songwriting at its most gruesome: "I came home wasted in the middle of the night." My, oh my. Ditto for country singer Johnny Reid, with the portentous Today I'm Gonna Try and Change the World ("gonna take it one day at a time").

Ben Mulroney, host of the gossip show eTalk, who also hosted the earlier red-carpet preview, admitted: "I want to be as cool as Jim Cuddy. But let's face it, that's never going to happen" – pause, then punchline – "because I'm Ben Mulroney."

There was a touching testimonial by Yoko Ono to the 1969 bed-in at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel that yielded Give Peace a Chance, "which continues to be a peace anthem around the world." It was "inspired by Canada and Montreal." By the way, at 78, she looked terrific.

It was great to see that Montreal's Christine Jensen won the award for contemporary jazz album, for the beautiful big-band disc Treelines. And Karkwa (a current fave of Jollis Roberts) won for francophone album (Les chemins de verre).

After K'naan won for best single, the World Cup anthem Wavin' Flag, it was time for the night's most anticipated moment: the Allan Waters Humanitarian Award presentation to Neil Young, who managed to survive the announcer capping a highlights montage with "you truly have a heart of gold."

Young gave a humble lecture: "Everything I've ever done was with other people." His advice to new acts: "Music comes first ... then you can do this humanitarian-y stuff." And finally: "Look inside yourself and other people, and you'll find out what it's like to be a humanitarian."

Soon afterward, accepting the award for artist of the year, the career veteran delivered the night's best line: "What year is this?"

And when Arcade Fire won their fourth Juno, for best album (The Suburbs), Richard Perry said: "Thank you to Neil Young and what you spoke about. It really hit the heart."

The 2¼-hour show clocked in just two minutes over length. Though there were some low points, it was the most compelling Juno bash I've ever seen.

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